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## **Family and funerals: taking a relational perspective**

### **Abstract**

This paper explores a number of relational features of a contemporary funeral: content; participation; and commercial choice. In so doing it utilises Finch and Mason's (2000) concept of 'reflexive relationalism' to show that the contemporary funeral is an event when familial relationships can be (re)affirmed and rejected. This 'doing' of family has methodological implications for the future study of funerals and, it is argued here, this necessarily requires the inclusion of class culture.

**Key words:** commerce, family, funeral, participation, ritual

### **Introduction**

As long as people have lived in groups they have used rituals after death (Hoy, 2013). Revealing the cultural values by which people live their lives and appraise their experiences (Metcalf and Huntington, 1991), today death rituals provide an opportunity for interactions between the networks and individuals within which the deceased lived (Fulton, 1995, cited in Hawdon and Ryan, 2011, p. 1366). Both enabling *and* limiting the expression of grief (Neimeyer, Klass and Dennis, 2014; Walter, 1999) the most universal of these rituals in contemporary western industrialised societies is the funeral. Offering "... a place to express and receive social support" (O'Rourke, Spitzberg and Hannawa, 2011, p.733), the way in which funerals are conducted today reveals much about relationships and interaction between and *within* families

(Sanders, 2010), not least because "... there are few family events that the entire family attends" (Black et al, 2014, p. 528).

Yet as has been noted in this journal and elsewhere, funerals have been consistently overlooked as a lens for examining relationships (O'Rourke et al, 2011; Holloway, Adamson, Argyrou, Draper and Mariau, 2013). In part addressing this gap, this paper makes a case for funerals as a key ritual event that can provide insight into expectations about contemporary relationships and family. It is written with an implicit assumption that this is an opportune moment to nurture the study of funerals and their contribution to the making and unmaking of family, at a time when the world population continues to age (United States Census Bureau, 2015). In the next twenty years, there will be more funerals in both the US and UK, and elsewhere in almost all western industrialised societies, as the death rate begins to rise (World Health Organisation, 2013).

Drawing on US and UK literature on the contemporary funeral, and located within this demographic context, the paper argues that funerals need to be examined with relationships and family as the unit of analysis at their heart, with a recognition and appreciation of the influence of class culture in this context. The paper does not seek to provide an exhaustive account of what function the funeral historically or currently serves, not least because this has been done elsewhere (see Walter, 1990; Howarth, 1996; and Laderman, 2003). Moreover it does not seek to offer a comparative analysis of funeral ritual and commerce between the US and UK, owing to the difficulties associated with cultural comparison (see Walter, 2005) and diversity within ethnic groups (see Irish, 1993). Rather, as noted over half a century ago, it seeks to recognise rituals associated with death (such as the funeral) as part of "... the nucleus of a particular culture complex" (Faunce and Fulton, 1958, p. 205). This nucleus

necessarily includes socio-cultural change, economic change, and the intersection of relationships and ceremonial practice (Sofka, 2004), all of which transcend national boundaries and literatures.

To date, work has been conducted on the growing trend for personalisation of and at the funeral (see for example Ramshaw, 2010; Caswell, 2011). In his seminal review of death in late-modernity Walter (1994) argued that in present day industrialised society individuals assert control over their death and associated activities, but *only* with the contribution of others. In contrast to a contemporary emphasis in social science (see e.g. Giddens, 2004) that reflects a neo-liberal privileging of “autonomous citizens who participate fully in the market” (Houston, 2016, p. 532) Walter is acknowledging that when facing death individuals do not act within a social and cultural void; rather they make decisions *via* frames of reference, guidance from others and based on their previous experience(s). These frames of reference include religious belief, professional guidance (see Hyland and Morse, 1995) and their formal/informal networks (see Brown and Walter, 2014). Elsewhere they have been referred to as the ‘death surround’ (Rando 1993, cited in Sofka, 2004, p. 22).

It is within this death surround, this paper argues, that people come together after someone has died, making decisions about what happens next, actively and reflexively (re)affirming and rejecting familial relationships. This coming together can create potential for family conflict (Sofka, 2004), for example when family members disagree about how much to spend on the funeral (see Corden, Hirst and Nice, 2008).

In exploring some of the relational decisions and tensions involved in the organisation and conduct of a funeral this paper first provides a brief overview of the history of the study of funerals and the development of family practice(s) theory. Second, it explores

the funeral as a relational event in three ways: via content, participation, and commercial choice. Discussing and drawing on the current relational turn within the social sciences, whereby interest has shifted away from individuals as isolated actors towards an understanding of people acting *in relation* to one another, the paper specifically utilises the concept of reflexive relationalism (Finch and Mason, 2000). This concept, explained in more detail later in the paper, illustrates the way in which family is something that is *practiced*, rather than a static entity. Examining the funeral from this perspective enables one to regard it as a highly (public) relational event, where family is drawn on as a frame of reference and is actively made and unmade, 'done' and 'undone', (re)affirmed and rejected. Third, it makes a case for the funeral to be regarded as a key lifecourse event. Highlighting some of the analytical and methodological implications of this, it stresses the importance of recognising the intersections of class culture with family as a further frame of reference at a funeral.

### **A brief history of the study of funerals**

In order to understand the funeral from a relational perspective it is first important to situate current funeral practice within historical context. This paper takes as a starting point the establishment of the funeral industry in the US and UK within the mid-1800s. It was during this period that carpenters began to produce coffins as a part of their business, expanding into the provision of funeral paraphernalia (Litten, 1991; Fritz, 1994-1995; Pine, 2015). As the paraphernalia increased over the next 100 years the content of the funeral began to be regarded as an expression of wealth and social standing, and for those who could not afford a funeral there was considerable shame (Hurren 2012; Laqueur, 1983).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, as US and UK society urbanised and industrialised, death began to be shaped by three interconnected developments. The first was the growing use of technical/medial rational discourse; the second was the growth of specialist and technical practitioners including pathologists, cemetery managers and registrars (Walter, 2005); with the third being a growth in secular and individualised beliefs (Ramshaw, 2010; Jalland, 2013). Correspondingly, the funeral began to be seen as a reflection of the deceased's standing in the social order rather than the fate of their soul (Laqueur, 1983).

Fast forward fifty years and the early decades of the twentieth century were to have a profound impact on mourning behaviour and the conduct of funerals in the US and UK. With child and young person mortality still relatively commonplace at the start of the twentieth century (Pine, 2015), two world wars in the first half of the century meant that the generations living and born at that time already had - and further developed - a cultural norm of facing death. In the UK, such was the scale of the loss endured by the wars that the resulting restraint in mourning and ritual became conflated with courage and stoicism (Walter, 1999). "Bereaved people were advised to keep busy, and move on, even if their hearts were breaking. They must behave normally, pretend to be cheerful, but grieve privately in silence" (Jalland, 2013, p. 19). Funerals correspondingly shrank in size and were quieter, solemn affairs. At the same time, in the US suspicion of what happened at the point of death and afterwards began to mount as the typical place of death moved from the home to the hospital and the influence of the funeral director post-death grew (Laderman, 2003). Referred to as the sequestration of death (Mellor and Shilling, 1993), during this time death and its impact in both the US and UK was becoming increasingly concealed from public view and managed behind closed doors. For many families, beyond the funeral, this remains

the case today as “the main mourners are no longer co-resident, and may spend much of each day in the company of people who never knew the deceased. This means that grief becomes a private experience; the more dispersed the chief mourners and the more fragmented their social networks, the more private grief becomes” (Walter, 2015, p. 12). There are indications that this is changing slowly however, with discourse surrounding death and its associated rituals shifting from one of sequestration to community (Walter, 2015) and transcendence (Lee, 2008) via new age narratives and online activities. An example of this, Sherlock has argued, is online mourning where there exists a “mythical interpretation like the notion of the Internet as *digital heaven*” (Sherlock, 2013, p.173, original emphasis).

### *Family practice(s)*

What happens after death, specifically the expression of loss and the associated funerary ritual, is thus shaped by social, political, cultural and economic contexts – be they national conflict, commercial developments, shifting belief systems, or the prevailing discourse(s) about the ‘right’ way to experience and manage death. Yet within death studies and end of life care literature the family have been systematically overlooked as a key frame of reference, source of guidance, experience, conflict, and unit of analysis, with emphasis on individual care, preferences, choice and agency (Broom and Kirby, 2013).

Moreover, when family has been discussed it has typically been used as a shorthand term for referring to a nuclear family, overlooking the way in which relationships are practiced and expectations about familial responsibilities and obligation (re)affirmed and/or rejected (see Morgan, 1996). Finch (2007) and Finch and Mason (1993) have

argued that these family responsibilities need to be appreciated as “... *open-ended processes*, not according to pre-existing rules, but rather through explicit and implicit negotiation between individuals within given social and economic contexts” (Finch and Mason, 1993, p. 144, emphasis added).

The ‘open-ended process’ they speak of has been best theorised through their concept of reflexive relationalism, whereby ‘family’ is identified, shaped, established and (re)affirmed through social action (Finch and Mason, 2000). Finch and Mason thus argue that contemporary family needs to be understood as a *practice*. Generated from a later study into inheritance and the making of family through the dispersal (and withholding) of wealth, Finch and Mason further (2000) suggest that this practice extends beyond blood ties and includes close friends. As a result, familial relationships are continually (re)negotiated through relationally determined acts, such as – in their original study – that of bequeathing assets. From this perspective, contemporary family is therefore much more than simply a *nuclear* family; it is a frame of reference within which decisions about inclusion and exclusion are made, and where relationships are practiced, performed, rejected or rebuffed. It is something that is actively ‘done’.

Understanding family as a relational process of consciously including and excluding has been more recently illustrated by Roberts, Griffiths and Verran (2015) in their analysis of commercial ultrasound practices and the inviting of specific family members to share the imagery. In specific reference to the funeral, the concept of reflexive relationalism has been employed in understanding how funeral costs are determined when applying for state support in the UK (see Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). Elsewhere, in their examination of the accuracy and authenticity of the eulogy Bailey and Walter (2016) have hinted at the way in which families are constructed and



performed at a funeral through the public narration of the deceased's life. Their assessment bears a resemblance to the stories Finch and Mason (2000) detail in their participants' accounts of inheritance choices. In these accounts moral reasoning is employed to determine who gets what and how this marks individuals as being 'in' and 'out' of the family. Significantly – and echoed in this paper – neither Bailey and Walter (2016), nor Finch and Mason (2000), regard 'family' as restricted to blood relations, and instead conceptualise it as a product of intimacy and relationships of choice (see Roseneil and Budgeon, 2004). This is important in the context of this paper as those involved in the organisation of funerals are not necessarily immediate (blood) family, and may include close friends of the deceased (Banks, 1998).

In their study of funerals Bailey and Walter do not reflect further on the making and unmaking of relationships via the funeral beyond noting that this is an important characteristic of the ritual ceremony to recognise the deceased's *relational* identity, alongside their *biographical* one. There thus remains considerable scope for understanding family as a frame of reference and the social action of making and unmaking, (re)ffirming and rejecting familial relationships via the funeral. As this paper will show, determining who to include and exclude from participating, deciding the size and scope of the funeral can reveal much about the relationships of those people involved, as the commercial context in which these decisions are made (see Banks, 1998).

## **The making and unmaking of family relationships at a funeral**

### *Funeral content*

The first relational feature of the funeral that merits exploration is the content of the funeral itself and the extent to which this embodies and reflects familial relationships. Much has been written about the funeral content owing to its ritual purpose and public nature (see Gilbin and Hug, 2006; Thursby, 2006; Hoy, 2013). The surveillance of funeral content, Unruh (1979) has previously argued, is an evaluation of the extent to which the content reflects the identity of the deceased and the attendees, and whether their beliefs – be they religious, cultural, or familial - are followed or rejected.

In a more in-depth study of the connection between funeral content and belief, Draper, Holloway and Adamson (2013) suggest that there are five belief discourses through which contemporary death is conceptualised at a funeral: religious, dualist (body and soul), eco-spiritualist (natural cycle, emphasis on energy), death-as-transition (life before and life after) and materialist (no place to God, no post mortem existence). These discourses, they argue, are used by the organisers of the funeral as frames of reference within which to make their decisions regarding the funeral content. The extent to which a funeral is considered successful depends on the degree to which the organisers are able to marry their own (and the deceased's) belief systems with the ceremony content and, I would add, accurately reflect their relationship(s).

This alignment between belief, content and relationships in turn creates normative expectations regarding 'appropriate' content and conduct at funerals. For example, at a funeral for an older person who has lived through periods of mass grief as a result of one/two world wars (see Jalland, 2013), it may be seen as 'appropriate' to wear black, use a sombre poem or reading, and talk reverently about the deceased – although admittedly there is little more than anecdotal evidence to support this. With more studies on child and young person funerals it is possible to suggest with more confidence that more celebratory features may be used to reflect their youth or

relationship status in funerals, with applause or laughter, jovial songs and lively readings (Orpett Long and Buehring, 2014).

So powerful are these normative expectations associated with funeral content and conduct that a concept of “funeral deviance” has emerged (Forsyth, Palmer and Simpson, 2006, p. 124), whereby organisers and/or attendees knowingly subvert cultural and behavioural norms associated with death. This act of deviance could include, for example, wearing colours for older people, and spontaneous acts of aforementioned applause (see Foster and Woodthorpe, 2012 for a discussion about the use of spontaneous applause in other settings). In understanding this through the lens of reflexive relationalism, the way in which these norms are adhered to/rejected serves as a way of (re)affirming or rejecting family within the funeral. With norms not written down or shared in advance beyond the use of an Order of Service to guide the ceremony (Bailey, 2012), they instead serve as opportunities to demonstrate and reinforce the familial relationships, through making it clear who is ‘in the know’ and who is not; and who is invited to participate, and who is not (Bailey, 2012; see below). As Reeves (2011) has noted in this journal, there is a “grapevine” (p. 416) effect when decisions about funeral content (and performance – see next) are made.

Such norms of behaviour thus gives attendees the opportunity to deliberately conform or reject the requests of the organisers. These normative expectations regarding the content of the funeral and attendees’ behaviour are thus *relational* in how they are determined, experienced and perceived. Family relationships are recognised, reaffirmed or rejected through the perceived ‘appropriateness’ of the funeral content and its alignment with belief; how reflective the funeral content is of the deceased’s, the organiser’s, and the attendees’ attitude towards death; who is included (or not); and whether or not the content is adhered to or overruled.

## *Participation*

In their paper in this journal on what makes a 'good' funeral O'Rourke et al (2011) have argued that funeral participation is key to attendee satisfaction both in terms of organising and attending the event. While this is a useful starting point in understanding that the funeral is something that is actively performed rather than passively consumed (Bailey, 2012) O'Rourke et al subscribe to an individualistic view with an emphasis on how participation can facilitate an *individual's* experiences of grief. Importantly, this perspective does not take into account the way in which family acts as a frame of reference for inclusion, and the way in which funeral participation is negotiated by, within and between families.

There are, I argue, two key ways in which familial funeral participation is facilitated: the relationship between the family organisers and the funeral director, and relationship between the organisers and the funeral attendees. In relation to the first relationship, in her ethnography of a funeral directors, Howarth (1996) showed how funeral directors stage a theatrical presentation that attempts,

... to protect customers from the horrors of mortality, they suspend reality, a basic tenet of theater. In this way, and with unwitting collusion [from funeral attendees], a more palatable version of death is provided which shifts from stark, cold permanence to a more gentle and temporary slumber (p.5).

By doing the protecting of family organisers from the reality of death, Bailey (2010) and Parsons (2003) have noted that funeral directors can experience role conflict when determining whether their priority is to provide care or a commercial service for

their clients (see also Hyland and Morse, 1995). Certainly, from the outset of their interaction at the funeral director premises to the funeral event itself funeral directors are judged on the services that are 'purchased' as part of the commercial transaction and their relationship with their clients (of which more later). The long-established mono-directional model whereby a funeral organiser purchases the services of a funeral director is showing signs of change however, with Sanders (2012) arguing that today the funeral can be better understood as a 'co-production' between the funeral director and the organiser. With this move towards co-production there has been an increase in the personalised elements of the ritual such as decoration, music, eulogy, content and so on (Sanders, 2012). Correspondingly the organiser has a much greater role in shaping the content of the funeral in line with their attitude towards death (see earlier) and the way in which they wish to represent, reaffirm or reject familial relationships at the funeral.

Nonetheless, despite this greater influence in the organisation of the funeral and complicating this co-production model, there exists a clear mismatch of experience between the organiser and the funeral director, as "as routine, ordinary, and normalized as the ceremony is for the director, it is rather unique and extraordinary for the clients..." (Forsyth et al, 2006, p. 124). Moreover, the funeral director is in a position where they are able to take advantage of the organiser's lack of experience, raw grief and associated vulnerability (Banks, 1998). Thus, the participation of the family organiser is contingent on the *quality* of their relationship with the funeral director, as the party with more experience and insight into the management of the funeral event.

Compared to the relationship between the funeral director and the organiser, the relationship between the organiser and funeral attendee(s) is comparably under-theorised (Bailey, 2012). One of the most vivid analyses has come from a forty year

old dramaturgical account that examines the funeral as a performance. In this, Turner and Edgley (1976) provide an easily digestible account of the funeral, detailing the cast, the audience, the director, the front and back stage, and the props. The attendees at the funeral are in this analysis 'the audience', who arrive ready to consume and participate in the "dramaturgical curtain" (Sanders, 2012, p. 131) of the funeral. Far from being passive and disengaged, from this perspective attendees are consciously participating in the funeral performance (Bailey, 2012).

Examining a funeral using this dramaturgical lens sheds light on the ways in which family is (re)affirmed or rejected at a funeral. For example, who is chosen to give a eulogy will provide discernible evidence to others regarding the status of their relationship to the deceased and the organisers (Bailey and Walter, 2016). Similarly to sit close to the front of the venue suggests a relationship closeness and/or a high status relationship (Bailey, 2012) and vice versa: to locate oneself near the back of the audience indicates a weaker or lower status relationship, or one that needs to be concealed.

Through the lens of reflexive relationalism, it is possible to see that in such decisions about funeral participation, and the terms on which they participate, familial relationships are being (re)constructed and displayed, or rejected and hidden. Moreover, family is being used as a reference for attendees to judge the relationship(s) between the deceased, the organiser and other family members included within the funeral. In her doctoral research Bailey (2012, p. 215) exemplifies this via quotes from participants on their observations of participation in the funeral, such as:

... the family made it very personal - son played a guitar piece he had written and father liked; daughter spoke, grandson also spoke and younger grandchildren presented flowers and leaves that they had gathered. Wife read *The Road Less Travelled* and we sang *Morning has Broken*.

It was a very personal service, with readings by J's daughter and her two children and a short life history written and read by a man who had been a student in J's U3A Spanish class which she had taught for some years.

Through the selection of particular individuals to participate in the funeral, through the giving of the eulogy, the giving of readings, and the telling of stories relationships are being made and re-made via participation in the funeral service itself. A dramaturgical analysis provides a helpful lens through which to recognise the performative components of that participation. The extent to which this participation is possible however is constrained as a result of the choices made by the family, in terms of the size of the funeral audience, the venue, the length of the service and so on. All of these decisions have financial implications, and are thus commercial decisions. Bringing the above two relational features of the funeral together, this final way of interpreting the funeral is thus related to the commercial choices associated with the funeral and how these are negotiated and managed by the organisers, and regarded by the audience.

### *Commercial choice*

There has been a little interest in the commercial components and organiser decisions associated with the funeral (see Banks, 1998), with the funeral typically regarded as a 'distress purchase' whereby "emotions of grief are presumed to overshadow mourners'

capacity for logical decision-making and this renders funeral arranges as victims and so not fully responsible for their actions” (McManus and Schafer, 2014, p. 382). Such a view, McManus and Schafer go on to argue, diminishes the interpersonal conflict that can arise when making decisions about the funeral arrangements. Thus, the funeral is *more* than a ritualised or participatory event to be managed (as identified above); it is an *economic* issue for the organiser(s) as they negotiate expectations about the making of their family at a death ritual alongside the financial cost of doing so (Pine and Phillips, 1970). As McManus and Schafer (2014) note, it is a product of ‘socio-economic’ processes.

Purchasing decisions required when instructing the services of a funeral director include but are not limited to: the coffin, a hearse, orders of service, and catering for a wake/tea afterwards. In part, this proliferation of funerary services to choose from has developed as a response to “the desire to *simplify* the decision process required for those in grief” (Gentry et al, 1995, p. 129, emphasis added). Gentry et al (1995) go on to argue that grieving people “do not (nor do they wish to) play an active consumer role in decisions following the death of a loved one” (p. 138). However, as shown in the previous two sections of this paper, organisers are far from passive. Anecdotal evidence from those who work for a natural burial site in Liverpool, UK and who support the purchasing of burial leases and the arrangement of funerals (Thompson, 2017), indicates that people are increasingly ‘shopping around’ for funerals. Borne in part from the exponential growth in choice over the last two decades, this has led to the evolution of funerals into “customizable ceremonies that resemble polished productions sometimes bordering on forms of entertainment” (Sanders, 2010, p. 47). Thus rather than an emotionally-driven distress purchase, funeral organisers are actively and deliberately taking responsibility for costs (McManus and Schafer, 2014)



and (re)presenting (or rejecting) their family and relationships through a purchased public performance.

What is more, the amalgamation with expense and social standing that evolved in the 1800s is still present (see Hurren, 2012 for the shame associated with not being able to afford a funeral). Almost fifty years ago Pine and Phillips (1970) claimed that decisions about the funeral were complicated by the perception that expense equated to emotional attachment and the quality of relationships. This emphasis on emotional attachment was taken further by McManus and Schafer (2014) who argued that funeral arrangements were the product of “emotional stratification of responsibility” (p. 394), where feelings of duty and obligation (which, they argue, are class based – of which more later) intersect with funeral choices. This sentiment was echoed by Sanders (2012) who noted that:

The intimacy of such an endeavour [of organising a funeral] can be daunting because the expressive equipment furnished by the funeral provider (e.g. casket, chapel, musical accompaniment) is, to some degree, a proxy for *the emotive intent* of the survivor (Sanders, 2012, p. 265, emphasis added).

This emotive intent means that organisers of funerals are concurrently managing feelings of responsibility and obligation (McManus and Schafer, 2014) alongside the performance of family at the funeral and associated financial cost. For those who struggle to afford a funeral, there are considerable implications for determining how much to spend and the way in which the funeral – and thus their relationships – will be judged (see Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that there have been calls for funeral organisers to shop around for funerals *prior* to death

to disentangle the financial from emotional and familial expectations at the point of organising a funeral (Fan and Zick, 2004).

What is more, in terms of reflexive relationalism the determination of financial responsibility for a funeral can be extremely important, especially given the cost of funerals and their constituent parts in the US and UK (Federal Trade Commission, 2013; Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016). While the original use of the term in Finch and Mason's (2000) study of inheritance examined the act of transferring wealth to and between the living, in contrast paying for a funeral is about establishing obligation and payment for others after death. Echoing the importance placed on 'a good send off' in the eighteenth century pauper's funeral, the acceptance of responsibility for funeral costs and the corresponding determining of the content of the funeral, is a public display of the quality of the relationship between the family and the deceased, and their financial status (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016).

### **Discussion: what does this tell us and where next for the study of funerals?**

This paper has so far shown three ways in which family acts as a frame of reference and is made and unmade, (re)affirmed and rejected at the funeral. Through the content, participation and commercial choices made, organisers and attendees have the opportunity via the funeral to publicly (re)state or renounce their relationship to the deceased and each other. Echoing Walter's (1994) assertion that death is experienced *via* frames of reference and the influence of others, these activities take place within a 'death surround'. They are framed by varying belief discourses, norms about funeral performance, and shifting expectations regarding the role and input of the funeral director into the service. The growth of personalised and customised funerals, plus

their increasing cost(s), further means that whoever organises it within a family is also committing to the expense – or at least the responsibility to recover the cost from the deceased's estate (McManus and Schafer, 2014). They are also committing themselves to relationship-building with the funeral director and subjecting themselves to judgement from attendees as to the quality of their relationship with the deceased and their emotional intent (Sanders, 2012). Funerals can thus shed much light on the display or concealment of family, and expectations regarding family obligation. Recognising this potential provides substantial opportunity for the development and expansion of academic analysis into funerals, beyond their ritual purpose. There are four principle ways in which this could be taken further.

First and foremost, understanding a funeral as a product and display of the 'doing' of family means that scholarly emphasis can shift from a potentially restrictive examination of funerals as traditional vs. individual expression towards questions of familial negotiation, collaboration, participation, obligation, and the involvement of wider community. In so doing, funerals could be positioned as key lifecourse events in which family is actively and consciously practiced, and thus an event requiring attention from non-death studies scholars. Opening up the study of funerals to scholars beyond the field of death studies would mean that the contemporary funeral could be placed alongside other key life events that shape, influence and display family, such as birth, graduation, moving out of a parent's home, birthdays, inheritance, weddings, divorces, and care for elderly parents. These all present opportunities to create, foster, represent, express, affirm, deny, refuse, and reject family. They are, reflecting Finch and Mason's (2000) assertion, demonstrating how the contemporary family is now a *process*, constituted of activities in which family is (re)actively and continually being 'done' and undone.

Such an understanding breathes life into the organisation and content of contemporary funerals, better helping scholars understand what is happening during the event and why, and enabling professionals and death-care practitioners to provide appropriate support that recognises the relational and contingent nature of decision-making. What is more, conceptualising funerals in terms of the reflexive relational decisions outlined in this paper further enables us to appreciate the influence of the 'death surround' after someone has died, including the professional services called on for guidance (Hyland and Morse, 1995).

Second, recognising the relational way in which content, participation and commerce is negotiated at the time of the funeral means that further empirical study necessarily needs to examine the funeral with the family, not the individual, as the unit of analysis. Similar to Broom and Kirby's (2013) case for understanding dying as a *relational practice*, what happens after death needs to be examined in terms of familial expectation, obligation, and processes, situated within the ever-shifting social, political, cultural and economic contexts in which people make decisions.

Third, much greater attention needs to be paid to the financial costs associated with organising a funeral. It has been recognised in this journal (Banks, 1998; Fox et al, 2014) and elsewhere (Corden et al, 2008; McManus and Schafer, 2014) that there are financial consequences attached to bereavement, with funeral expenses being a substantial up-front immediate cost. Yet as has been shown in this paper these expenses are contingent on expectations regarding obligation to 'step up' for another family member. The way in which this obligation may or may not be gendered, or attached to age/sibling order, or geographical proximity (much like care of elderly parents, Pillemer and Sutor, 2014), requires further examination.

Moreover, funerals are shaped by class culture and associated class-based expectations regarding funeral participation, performance and familial responsibility (McManus and Schafer, 2014). Thus, fourth, much greater recognition needs to be given to the influence of class culture within families, the arrangement and content of funerals, and commercial contexts in which decisions about them are made. While there has been work on ethnicity and religion in relation to funerals around the world (see Morgan and Laungani, 2002; Collins and Doolittle, 2006) there has been very little on class. This reflects a dearth of class within death studies more generally, which Howarth (2007b) hypothesises is due to: death studies scholars being isolated from mainstream arguments in their disciplines; social scientists not believing in the concept; and because of the makeup of (middle class) academics studying death. Social scientists are not alone in their neglect of class in the study of death; rather they are mirroring the work of colleagues in other disciplines such as history, who have focused on upper and middle class burial and funerals at the expense of understanding working class culture and practice (Strange, 2000). This, it has been argued, has led to a documentation and normalisation of middle class ways of dying and grieving which in turn have gone on to shape scholars' understanding of what constitutes 'good taste' and 'vulgar' displays of grief (Conway, 2012). Pointing to Young and Cullen's (1996) assertion that for working class people in East London a good death was made possible *through* solidarity and camaraderie with others, Conway argues that class culture therefore needs to be understood as a *key* mediator in achieving a 'good death' and thus requires further examination.

Regardless of exactly why class has been neglected in studies into death, it is a *significant* oversight in the study of funerals. Not least this is because, as historical literature has shown, there is a deeply rooted class element in the organisation,

payment and content of funerals as a way of securing social standing (Hurren 2012). This connection between social standing and the funeral can still be found today, illustrated by tensions regarding affordability and providing a 'decent send off' for a family member (Woodthorpe and Rumble, 2016) and how funeral expenses can be regarded as a reflection of sentiment (see earlier). Almost seventy years ago it was claimed that lower income families spent more on funerals (Kephart, 1950) yet there has been surprisingly little from scholars as to whether this is still the case and the extent to which income and class culture intersect within death rituals such as the funeral. Indeed, even work that has explicitly recognised the class stratification of funerals (see McManus and Schafer, 2014) has not been able to describe in detail the ways in which class culture shapes funerals. Thus the extent to which expectations about the 'doing' of family and the processes whereby relationships are (re)affirmed and rejected via a funeral between and *within* different class groups requires much greater attention.

## **Conclusion**

Drawing on the lens of reflexive relationalism proposed by Finch and Mason (2000) this paper has shown that the funeral is a key lifecourse event whereby family and relationships are being 'done'. In the determination of funeral content, participation in the funeral performance, and the commercial choice(s) made, family acts as a frame of reference and is being actively being negotiated, (re)affirmed and displayed to others, concealed or rejected. Much like the act of bequeathing assets, the organisation and performance of the funeral can thus be regarded as a "... product and practice of relatedness..." (Finch and Mason, 2000, p. 164).

As an event that reflects contemporary familial processes where family is being continually made and re-made, understanding the relatedness of the funeral requires further study with the family, or 'death surround', as the unit of analysis. In other words, scholars need to examine the contingent way in which decisions about the funeral are arrived at, and the potential escalation and resolution of conflict (Sofka, 2004). This further requires an appreciation of the subtle (and perhaps not so subtle) influence of class culture, both on the funeral itself and its intellectual study.

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